

be ready!

a sermon preached on the

twenty-third sunday after pentecost

12 November 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr ken Hewlett

the lections: Amos 5: 18-24; Psalm 78; 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-18; Matthew 25: 1-13.

At a first glance this parable seems to be a bit unfair; it seems unfair that five foolish bridesmaids are excluded from the wedding celebration simply because they forgot to bring enough oil for their lamps. It also seems more than reasonable to raise the question—why didn't the wise ones share some of their oil with them? Were they not guilty of blatant selfishness? As usual this parable of Jesus is deeper than it seems. There is far more involved than a little lamp oil. Here is an attempt of a modern version of the parable; I hope that it will help us deepen our understanding of the original version.

The Kingdom of heaven is like 10 shoppers who went to look for bargains in the after Christmas sales. They set out bright and early and to their great delight they secured places near the head of the queue outside of a cash only store known for its generous discounts. Each one of the ten had made sure that they had their purse or wallet in a safe place. Five of our shoppers were wise and generous people who had made a lot of personal sacrifices in saving up for the sales. They desperately needed the bargains as each had large young families to provide for. They were not thinking of themselves but of their homes and their children.

The other five shoppers were foolish and selfish—they didn't really need the bargains as they didn't have dependant family members. It was a combination of greed and the excitement of bargain hunting that had brought them along. One thing was clear: they were thinking only of what they could get out of it for themselves.

The store was late in opening; the waiting was tiring; all ten shoppers grew sleepy and managed 40 winks while they waited. Then suddenly there was a cry 'They're opening!' With that the shoppers checked their wallets and purses. It was then that foolish ones realised that they actually didn't have much cash for this cash only store they had their debit and credit cards but very little cash. In their panic they turned to the wise ones and said 'Lend us some money we will pay you back after when we can get to an ATM or a bank'. 'Sorry' the wise ones answered, we have barely enough for ourselves. This is our big opportunity—we cannot afford to miss it—the best thing you can do is head off looking for a bank or an ATM.'

As they said this they were carried inside the store on the crest of the first wave of frantic bargain hunters. As for the foolish ones they were left standing all alone outside of the store. They soon came to their senses, and went off in a taxi to find a bank or an ATM. When they got back to the store it was half empty and all the good bargains had gone; they went to the manager to complain. 'Sorry' he said, 'I cannot really do anything to help you. You should have been here on time.' They knew of course he was right, they departed empty handed, sad and frustrated—all because of their foolishness and carelessness.

Now let us go back to Jesus' parable. It should becoming clear to us that we are not talking about a momentary lapse of memory—forgetting to bring along some extra oil. What we are dealing with are two contrasting attitudes towards the wedding feast.

For the wise bridesmaids it was clearly the chance of a lifetime. It was something they really appreciated and for which they had prepared diligently. Here was a never to be repeated opportunity to meet the Bridegroom and to get into the wedding feast—there was no way that they were going to miss it!

For the foolish ones I suspect their attendance was just for the fun—a bit of a lark. They tagged along out of sense of duty or habit. Even so, they felt let down when they didn't get in. But it was their whole attitude that was wrong, not just one little lapse of concentration or memory. In other words, they were not judged on one moment in their lives. The first five were ready, careful and wise—all doers of the word. The second five were unprepared, careless and foolish—mere hearers of the word.

For us the lesson is pretty obvious; we are not dealing with a few bargains, or even with a one-off wedding feast. The stakes are far higher. It is our eternal salvation that is at stake. We are talking about the possibility of finding ourselves locked out of the eternal banquet.

When the Lord's call comes, all that will matter will be the kind of people we are, not what we have achieved or what we have amassed. What if we should be caught unprepared, with no oil in our lamps? We have to make sure that our lamps are always burning. Therefore, we must keep putting oil into them. The Lord can come at any time. This is a clear gospel message and we are reminded at this time every year of the church's calendar that we need to be ready.

However, let us also remember that it is something joyful that we have been invited to. It is a wedding feast, not a funeral; it is too good to be missed. If we have made Christ our best and closest companion on the road of life, then it is unlikely that his final coming will find us unprepared!